

Painting

Chapter 3



Baroque Art

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In fine art, the term Baroque describes a movement, originating in Rome, which flowered during the period c.1590-1720, and which embraced painting, and sculpture as well as architecture. After the idealism of the Renaissance (c.1400-1530), Baroque art above all reflected the religious tensions of the age - notably the desire of the Catholic Church in Rome (as announced at the Council of Trent, 1545-63) to reassert itself in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Many Catholic Emperors and monarchs across Europe had an important stake in the Catholic Church's success, hence a large number of architectural designs, paintings and sculptures were commissioned by the Royal Courts of Spain, France, and elsewhere, in order to glorify their own divine grandeur, and in the process strengthen their political position. By comparison, Baroque art in Protestant areas like Holland had far less religious content, and instead was designed essentially to appeal to the growing aspirations and financial strength of the merchant and middle classes.



The most important painting during the period beginning around 1600 and continuing throughout the 17th century, and into the early 18th century is identified today as Baroque painting. Baroque art is characterized by great drama, rich, deep color, and intense light and dark shadows. As opposed to Renaissance art, which usually showed the moment before an event took



place, Baroque artists chose the most dramatic point, the moment when the action was occurring: Michelangelo, working in the High Renaissance, shows his David composed and still before he battles Goliath; Bernini's baroque David is caught in the act of hurling the stone at the giant. Baroque art was meant to evoke emotion and passion instead of the calm rationality that had been prized during the Renaissance.

Among the greatest painters of the Baroque period are Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Rubens, Velázquez, Poussin, and Vermeer. Caravaggio is an heir of the humanist painting of the High Renaissance. His realistic approach to the human figure, painted directly from life and dramatically spotlighted against a dark background, shocked his contemporaries and opened a new chapter in the history of painting. Baroque painting often dramatizes scenes using chiaroscuro light effects; this can be seen in works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and La Tour.

The prosperity of 17th century Holland led to an enormous production of art by large numbers of painters who were mostly highly specialized and painted only genre scenes, landscapes, Still-lives, portraits or History paintings. Technical standards were very high, and Dutch Golden Age painting established a new repertoire of subjects that was very influential until the arrival of Modernism.



History

The Council of Trent (1545–63), in which the Roman Catholic Church answered many questions of internal reform raised by both Protestants and by those who had remained inside the Catholic Church, addressed the representational arts in a short and somewhat oblique passage in its decrees. This was subsequently interpreted and expounded by a number of clerical authors who demanded that paintings and sculptures in church contexts should depict their subjects clearly and powerfully, and with decorum, without getting too flowery or showy. This return towards a useful purpose for art drove the innovations of Caravaggio and the Carracci brothers, all of whom were working (and competing for commissions) in Rome around 1600. However, although religious painting, history painting, allegories, and portraits were still considered the most noble subjects, landscape, still life, and genre scenes were also becoming more common in Catholic countries, and were the main genres in Protestant ones.

A rather different art developed out of northern realist traditions in 17th century Dutch Golden Age painting, which had very little religious art, and little history painting, instead playing a crucial part in developing secular genres such as still life, genre paintings of everyday scenes, and landscape painting. While the Baroque nature of Rembrandt's art is clear, the label is less useful for Vermeer and many other Dutch artists. Flemish Baroque painting shared a part in this trend, while also continuing to produce the traditional categories.

Styles and Types of Baroque Art

In order to fill its role as propaganda, Catholic inspired Baroque art tended to be large scale and public, such as monumental wall paintings and frescoes for the ceilings and walls of palaces and churches. Baroque painting illustrated key elements of catholic doctrine, either directly in biblical works or indirectly in mythological allegorical compositions. Along with this monumental approach, painters portrayed a strong sense of movement, using swirling spirals and upward diagonals and strong color schemes in order to dazzle and surprise the viewer. New techniques such as *tenebrism*¹ and *chiaroscuro*² were developed to enhance the mood of these works. Baroque sculpture, typically larger than life size, also showed a similar sense of dynamic movement.

¹ a style of painting, popular in the 17th-century and largely associated with Caravaggio, that uses large areas of shadow and dark colors, sometimes with a shaft of light

² the use of light and shade in paintings and drawings, or the effect produced by this

Baroque architecture was designed to create spectacle and illusion. The straight lines of the Renaissance were replaced with flowing curves, while the domes/roofs were enlarged and interiors were carefully constructed to produce spectacular effects of light and shade. It was a powerful style that played on people's emotions and was able to achieve dramatic results.

As is evident, although most of the painting, sculpture and architecture of the 17th Century is known as Baroque, it is by no means a single style. There are at least three different strands of baroque art:

1. Religious Grandeur

This was a triumphant, extravagant and almost theatrical style of religious art, commissioned by the Counter-Reformation and the courts of the absolute monarchs of Europe. This type of Baroque art is exemplified by the bold visionary sculpture of Bernini and by the grandiose paintings of the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens.

2. Greater Realism

A new more life-like approach to painting people was developed at this time. This new approach was championed by Carravaggio and Velazquez. The boldness and physical presence of Caravaggio's figures, the lifelike approach to religious painting adopted by Velazquez as well as the new form of movement that characterized the art of the day- all these elements were part of the new baroque style.

3. Easel Art

Unlike the large-scale, public, religious work in Baroque artists in catholic countries, Baroque art in protestant Holland was exemplified by a new form of easel-art- a glossy form of genre painting³, created for the prosperous middle class household. This new Dutch Realist school of genre painting also led to enhanced realism in portrait art and landscape painting, flower pictures, animal compositions and, in particular, to new forms of still life painting, including *vanitas* works.

More History

Following the pronouncements made by the *Council of Trent* on how art might serve religion, together with the upsurge in confidence in the Roman Catholic Church, it became clear that a new style of art was necessary in order to support the Catholic Counter Reformation and fully convey the miracles and sufferings of the Saints to the congregation of Europe. This style had to be more forceful, more emotional and imbued with a greater realism. Strongly influenced by the views of the Jesuits (the Baroque is sometimes referred to as 'the Jesuit Style'), architecture, painting and sculpture were to work together to create a unified effect. The initial impetus came from the arrival in Rome during the 1590s of Carravaggio (1571-1610). His presence sparked a new interest in realism as well as antique forms, both of which were taken up and developed (in

³ Genre painting- a painting of household scenes.

sculpture) by Alessandro Algardi (in sculpture) and Bernini (in sculpture and architecture). Peter Paul Rubens, who remained in Rome until 1608, was the only great Catholic painter in the Baroque idiom, although Rembrandt and other Dutch artists were influenced by both Caravaggism and Bernini.

By the end of the 17th century the grand Baroque style was in decline, as was its principal sponsor, Italy. The coming European power was France, where a new and contrasting style of decorative art was beginning to emerge. This light-hearted style soon enveloped architecture, all forms of interior decoration, furniture, painting, sculpture and porcelain design. It was known as Rococo.

Portraits in the Baroque Era (c.1600-1740)

Art of the Baroque era, including portrait art, was driven by several factors. First, the growing commercial strength of Holland, France, Spain, and Britain; second, sponsorship of the visual arts by the Catholic Church in order to heighten its influence during the Counter-Reformation; thirdly, the increased use of portable art media like canvases. In addition, Baroque portraiture benefited from the enduring influence of the Renaissance. For example in 1669, Andre Felibien, Secretary to the French Académie des Beaux-Arts, annunciated a fixed hierarchy of the subject matters, which was adopted by most official academies of fine art in Europe. Felibien ranked paintings according to their subject matter, as follows: (1) History; (2) Portrait; (3) Genre Painting; (4) Landscape; (5) Still Life. This ranking system greatly stimulated competition among portrait painters from Holland, Flanders, France, Spain and Italy.



Portrait of Pope Innocent X (1650)
by Spanish Court Painter and
Old Master, Diego Velazquez.

Baroque Portrait Artists

Among the foremost Baroque Old Masters of portraiture were: the Dutch Realist Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, the genre-painter and portraitist Jan Vermeer, the exuberant Catholic Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens, Rubens' pupil, the Antwerp painter Anthony van Dyck, and the prolific Dutch painter of individual and group portraits Frans Hals.



Detail from Las Meninas (1656-57)
by Diego Velazquez.

Other famous painters of the period include: the Spanish master Diego Velazquez, the chiaroscuro expert Caravaggio, the Neapolitan artist Jose Ribera, and Giovanni Bernini. Nicolas Poussin, the founder of French classical painting and one of the great academic-style artists of the Baroque period, who elevated easel-size works to the status of large-scale history painting, executed few if any portraits, except for a small number of self-portraits.



The Laughing Cavalier (1624)
by Baroque portraitist Frans Hals.

Rise of the Professional Portrait Painter

With the establishment of portraiture as second only to history-painting in the painting hierarchy, many artists turned increasingly to portraits as a more secure way of earning a living.

Among the techniques used by these professionals to enhance their artworks, and to elevate the status of the portrait and its subject, were two elements - both reflected in works by Rembrandt. First, the accumulation of figure drawing and figure painting studies depicting facial expressions. This speeded up the painting process and facilitated the depiction of a wider range of human emotions. Several of Rembrandt's self-portraits were executed as finished studies of such expressions. Second, the setting of the portrait in an historical or dramatic context, as exemplified by Rembrandt's Night Watch.

Baroque Art questions

1. Baroque art reflected the struggle between _____.
2. Why did political leaders buy into/provide support for the Baroque movement?
3. How was the Baroque art of Protestant countries different than that of Catholic countries?
4. When was the Baroque period?
5. How is Baroque art different than Renaissance art?
6. Compare Bernini's David with Michelangelo's David.
7. Name 4 of the big names of Baroque art.
8. What was the Council of Trent and how did it change art?
9. What were the most popular subjects for art in Catholic countries?
10. What were the most popular subjects in Protestant countries?
11. Describe Catholic Baroque art. What did it look like and why was it created that way?
12. What is tenebrism?
13. What is Chiaroscuro?
14. What are the three strands of Baroque art?
15. Which one of these strands was more Catholic, which was more protestant and which was shared by both?
16. What is a *genre painting* and where was it important?
17. What drove art of the Baroque period? (Name three factors)
18. What was the hierarchy of subject matters of painting?
19. What affect did the hierarchy have on painters?
20. Who were the greatest portrait painters of the Baroque period? (name 5)
21. What did Rembrandt do that changed portrait painting? (name 2 things)